Creating #Team Turner

An Autoethnography of connection within Social Work education

How did I get here?

On a fine summer's day in July, I find myself facing a large audience as the middle speaker within a three-part Keynote presentation on social media, delivered to the Joint Social Work Education Conference (JSWEC). Amongst the spectators inside what feels to me at this moment like the Coliseum, are the great and the good of Social Work- academics and practitioners whose work I have read and admired for years.

My account of how a part-time, mature doctoral student, single-parent and unlikely user of social media, came to find myself addressing such an auspicious audience will form much of this chapter. Whilst analyses of social media use within education, are beginning to appear more frequently in the literature, these are often concerned with the potential pitfalls (Duncan-Daston, Hunter-Sloan and Fullmer, 2013; Allwardt, 2011; Bolton, 2011). Within this chapter, however, I will concentrate on the positive contributions of social media, particularly the networking site Twitter, to building professional and personal communities, distributing knowledge and reducing isolation.

I have chosen to write the chapter as an autoethnography, a methodology which mirrors social networking by both reflecting and connecting the personal inside wider social systems. Denzin and Lincoln (2003) position autoethnography within the fifth key moment in the history of qualitative research, alongside other innovative qualitative practices, which like social media itself, offer challenges to conventional academic traditions. Drawing from Richardson (1997) I have also interspersed the text with a series of 'scenes' in order to depict the very vibrant, lived process which led to my improbable interest in social media and my subsequent involvement with this, within social work education.

Smashing the machines

When I began my Ph.D study in September 2007, I had been away from both education and formal employment for several years caring for my children, the youngest of whom had recently started school. Stepping into a campus environment for the first time since completing my MA in Social Work, twenty-three years previously, I was immediately made aware of how much had changed, by the students around me talking loudly into, or gazing at mobile phones. Irritably, I questioned what they could all be talking about and whether any of this mobile communication was actually necessary.

Winterson (1996, p.97) offers a description of her relationship to technology, which matches mine at this time:

> The scientists say I can choose but how much choice have I over their other inventions. My life is not my own, shortly I shall have to haggle over my reality. Luddite? No, I don't want to smash the machines but neither do I want the machines to smash me.

Like Winterson, although I would not have called myself a Luddite, I had nevertheless always considered myself to be part of the 'lost generation' technologically – those of us who left school and indeed University, long before mobile technology, computer use and certainly social media became widespread. This left me with a lingering mistrust of technology and an irrational fear that by pressing the wrong keys on any device I would somehow cause irretrievable global damage. My anxiety and feelings of incompetence led to irritability around technology generally and frequent outbursts to my children about how much better things were in the 'old days', before everyone, as it seemed to me, was wedded to screens.

Scene 1: Family Time (1)

Saturday evening at home –'family time'. My children, Amy, Dan and I are in the front room of our house watching a favourite television programme, or at least I am watching whilst they gaze at mobile tablet devices

Me (irritably): Can you put those away please? We are either watching this programme and sharing family time or we may as well sit in separate rooms alone - or even go to bed!

Amy (protesting): I'm just looking at 'Twitter' to see what everyone's saying about this - don't you want to know?

Me (with a rising tide of further irritation): Twitter! No I do not want to know what's going on there! We've always managed perfectly well without it and I can see what I think without having to know what everybody else is saying… You're ruining family time … Please turn it off!

Amy (sulking): I just thought it would make it more fun to know what everyone else is saying - if you looked you might think it was funny too

Dan slyly pretends to take the moral high ground whilst slipping his iPod under a cushion and peering at it intermittently

I explode with impotent rage and frustration ……..

Curtain

Working from Home

Although my return to University was the result of starting a Ph.D, many of the financial, family and other challenges I faced throughout the process are shared by students at all levels of study (Collins, 2008). Initially, after so many years away from education I found both the academic requirements and the language difficult, particularly as I was combining these with the school run and other practical parental tasks. One minute my head would be swimming with Foucault, Barthes and Bourdieu, whilst in the next I would be helping to plan

a cake sale, or searching for lost PE kit. In the early days however, one of the most difficult and intractable problems I faced, was the isolation caused by working from home.

At this point, there was none of the support for doctoral students which appeared later on during my Ph.D process. I would visit the University to attend supervision sessions, usually on a monthly basis but apart from that there was little reason to be on campus and no office provision. The seminars and research presentations which were intermittently available to doctoral students, tended to be arranged for 4 or 5 o'clock, times which clashed with my parental duties and therefore attendance entailed complicated childcare arrangements.

Another social barrier was the subject of my research, which also required skilful negotiation at University gatherings. I had trained as a social worker during the 1980's and subsequently worked within various fields. However, my return to education was prompted by the sudden, unexpected death of my son Joe, in March 2005. Having been a social worker myself, I was both intrigued and bewildered by the behaviour of many of the professionals involved with Joe's death and my research was prompted by a drive to further understand this and the effect it may have on parents. However, before I began my Ph.D, I had not realised what an obstacle this line of research would be within many contexts, not least at coffee mornings, workshops and other networking events. During formal presentations of my research work, it was common for people to leave the room in tears and therefore in other contexts I began to navigate around the subject, which limited my opportunities to discuss my research and thereby increased my isolation.

Scene 2: 'Something so depressing'

Three day creative writing workshop for doctoral students from all Schools and Departments at my University. Participants entered the room nervously searching around for an empty seat next to someone who seems friendly. The workshop facilitator sits at the front - she doesn't look up as people enter

Facilitator: I would like you all to turn to the person sitting next to you and each spend three minutes talking about your research and what brought you to it

I feel a rising tide of panic. Glancing at the door I plan my escape, but the young bright eyed man sitting next to me turns around with eager anticipation

Young man: Hi, my name's Justin - do you want to go first or shall I?

Denise: Oh no you please really *(attempting to delay the inevitable moment of embarrassment)*

Justin: Well, I'm from media and film. I've worked as an independent filmmaker for a while and then I became really interested in the use and depiction of animals within films, so I'm exploring that within my research. I'm finding it really enjoyable. What about you?

Denise: *(wildly contemplating telling him that my research is on global ballooning in the 18th century, I hear myself speak)* Ah well, mine is a little

different… I am in the Department of Social Work and well, I'm looking at what happens when a child dies suddenly and unexpectedly

Justin: *(flinching)* Oh really? Why ever did you want to do something so depressing?

Curtain

#eswphd.

By the time I reached the fifth year of my Ph.D research, much had changed within the University environment. The Social Work and Education Departments had been amalgamated to form a new School, a University Doctoral School had been established to meet the needs of Ph.D. research students and academic staff members were appointed within each Department to assist and work with doctoral students.

As part of these developments, I was asked to take up a new post, with the specific brief of supporting doctoral students within social work, particularly those who were part-time, long distance, in full-time employment or facing other barriers to effective engagement with networking opportunities.

Shortly after taking up this role I met with a fellow doctoral student to ask for his suggestions. I had known him for some time and consequently was aware of the challenges he faced with balancing parenting, full-time employment and his doctoral work. I felt sure that he would have some useful input for me within my new post. However it was with some consternation that I greeted his actual suggestion of establishing a weekly 'live- chat' on Twitter. His idea was to use this as a way of ameliorating many of the challenges faced, particularly by part-time, distance and other students trying to balance multiple roles. The weekly Twitter chat he proposed could allow students to 'meet' regularly in a space where they could discuss topics relevant to their research. He told me there was a weekly Twitter resource similar to this, which had proved highly successful, but suggested that ours be specific to education and social work.

Returning to Winterson's description of technology, whilst not wishing to seem a Luddite, I felt very dubious about this idea as I had hoped to provide some connection in the 'real world', rather than in 'intelligent space' (Winterson, 1996,p. 97). However, regardless of these reservations I could see the potential in the idea – I just wasn't convinced I was the person to carry it out. My doctoral colleague may as well have suggested I try open heart-surgery or join the Space programme – I had no idea how to use Twitter and viewed it only as a modern conceit, my teenager's fascination with which simply spoiled any opportunity for 'family time.'

It was with a sense of humility then, that I finally conceded and asked my daughter to show me around Twitter. Gazing at me suspiciously, she set me up online and demonstrated how to steer my way around my new account. Gingerly, as if it might explode at any moment, I interfaced with a few others. After an initial pilot session involving myself and colleagues, most of whom were also new to Twitter, we held our first live 'chat' under the hashtag

eswphd. Whilst this helped me to further understand how the process works, we had a very limited response from 'tweeps,' as I later learned Twitter users are termed.

Allwardt (2011, p.602) describes a similar lack of participation during experimental learning using a wiki, with social work students. One of her explanations for this limited interest was that academic use of communicative technologies differs from personal use in one highly significant way:

> Several months after the term ended, one student mentioned having difficulty with technology. The instructor asked how posting information on the wiki was different from posting information on Facebook or MySpace, which used essentially the same tasks of editing and saving. She replied, "But we want to do that.."

In the case of #eswphd, it seemed possible that people did not want to engage in an evening session with something work or study related, as Allwardt reports. However, having taken the trouble to set up the chat and acquire some rudimentary skills I was not to be deterred easily. Therefore, after a couple of weekly sessions, in an attempt to generate more interest I invited the Head of School to be a 'Guest Tweep.' He was already receptive to the benefits of Twitter and had used it to form contacts within the School prior to his appointment. His guest appearance attracted a few more 'tweeps' and I tentatively began to see the potential value of Twitter in advancing networking opportunities.

Gradually news of our regular #eswphd chats began to grow and although participation from our own students remained limited, there was a small but regular group of these. Student appraisal from Allwardt's research (2011, p.602) demonstrates that 'although the Web 2.0 generation may use these applications in their personal lives, they do not necessarily want to use them in the classroom' and the experience of #eswphd seemed to support this. However, when discussing this with colleagues, within my University Department, I was astonished to learn that another reason for the low participation may have been a fear of the technological skills needed to use social media effectively. This is supported by Allwardt (2011, p.603) who found that 'students also desired greater guidance with the technology. Not all students will grasp technological concepts quickly.' Having always assumed that a certain ineptitude with regard to technology was mine alone, I was surprised by this and even further astonished when I became identified within the Department as someone who had 'expertise' in the use of social media .

Building Community

Discussing findings from her research on the use of technology with social work students, Allwardt (2011, p.603) writes that 'given the nature of the social work profession, one must also consider the possibility that some social work students simply prefer to work with people face-to-face.' Other writers, including Bolton (2011) warn of the potential pitfalls of social media activity for social workers, advising those in the profession that 'our behaviour online is now as important as our behaviour off-line.'

However, social work is fundamentally a profession of relationship (Sudbery, 2002). The Professional Capability Framework, devised by the College of Social Work (2012) advises

that in order to be ready for practice at Level I, social work students should be able to demonstrate basic communication skills, the ability to engage with service users and the capacity to work as a member of an organisation, all of which require sound networking and social competencies. Whilst warning against the potential pitfalls of social media, Bolton (2011) also endorses the human need to network:

> Although the technology and tools are relatively new, the concept of social networking has been around much longer than the Internet. People are naturally social creatures; that's what makes social media such a powerful concept. Social media channels allow human beings to sort themselves seamlessly into groups and factions and maintain intimate relationships at greater distances than ever before.

In my own experiments with #eswphd, Bolton's description of human beings sorting themselves into groups and factions was clearly evidenced. Whilst participation from my own School remained limited, a community began to establish itself around #eswphd which demonstrated, often in inspiring ways, the human drive towards relationship.

As the live chats attracted growing attention, national Twitter users made various offers of assistance. Steve M, a man I had not and indeed may never meet in person had the technical skills to archive all the posts for those who had missed the session itself, whilst Paul B established a voting system for deciding each week's topic. Academics, including Amanda T and Joanne W both Senior Social Work lecturers from a different University, also offered to appear as guest 'tweeps.'

At the pinnacle of our success with #eswphd Jon B who followed me on Twitter and occasionally participated in our chats, offered to help with establishing a website. This was to act as a host for archiving the weekly chats, as well as offering a 'blog' facility for interested parties involved with social work or education. Jon worked with Liz T, another supporter of #eswphd in establishing this website, for no gain other than furthering a community project.

Having spent much of my Ph.D. process, feeling isolated and unable to make effective use of networking opportunities which often clashed with my personal responsibilities, #eswphd opened a new door into a world where people were actively interested in my ideas and in assisting with these. From feeling like a single mum with a part-time academic 'hobby' I also briefly found myself the central character in a Twitter support group, which Jon B dubbed #Team Turner. As the last stretch of thesis writing loomed, members of this eclectic online collective would regularly urge me on to finish the last few miles in what felt at times like an academic assault course. Additionally, whilst my research subject had led to awkwardness in 'real world' social encounters, within the 'Twittersphere' I found myself able to reveal only as much as I chose. In social media participation it is possible both to 'hide' and indeed to exit all together, without drawing attention to oneself and whilst these activities may raise ethical issues (Mukherjee & Clark, 2012) they avoid difficult and embarrassing encounters of the kinds I had experienced in other social environments .

'A world of contact and relationship.'

Writing about the ethical dilemmas posed by the growth of social media Cain and Fink (2010) state:

> The crux of the social media ethical dilemma is that social media was designed for social communication… However, the inherent nature of social media makes those communications available to a wider public.

In my personal experience, the ability of #eswphd to disseminate information to a wider public in this way was only positive - reducing my isolation and increasing my confidence. However, as Bolton (2011) warns there are significant ethical difficulties within this, particularly for social work. Social workers, including students are held accountable for their professional behaviour and the boundary between this and their personal lives, increasingly dissolves when, for example photographs from a drunken night out can be posted on the Internet (Bolton, 2011). Duncan-Daston, Hunter-Sloan and Fullmer (2013) make a number of recommendations for addressing these ethical difficulties, including that social workers abstain from using social media completely. However, Bolton (2011) quotes from a report for the Institute for Research and Innovation in Social Services, in which Shirley Ayres, a prominent social media commentator states

> If professionals working on the front line are unable, or not encouraged, to gain experience of the language and cultural norms of, say, Facebook, they are effectively disempowered from understanding and empathising with their increasingly fluent clients.

Not only as Ayres suggests, does non-participation in social media, create a potential barrier between social workers and service users, it may increasingly prevent their own access to information and professional opportunities. Bochner (1997, p.435) writes of trying to bridge the distance between the 'academic man' and the 'ordinary man' in a manner which creates new forms of knowledge, capable of enriching practice. His description has much in common with the current dilemmas around social media:

> The social world is understood as a world of contact, and relationship. It is also a world where consequences, values, politics, and moral dilemmas are abundant and central.

From my own experience of creating #eswphd, professional use of this emerging 'social world' has the capacity to create exciting and innovative opportunities which bridge the gulf between the 'ordinary' and the 'academic.' Into this new space 'a world of contact and relationship' capable of forging pioneering collaborations and truly advancing practice is made possible.

My own encounter with such 'a world of contact and relationship' brings me full circle to the beginning of this chapter and my part in the Keynote presentation at the Joint Social Work Education Conference. My memories of being invited to participate in this are blurred, but I do remember at one point on Twitter, Jon B suggesting it as the germ of an idea which then seemed to morph into reality. Like many good ideas, it seemed initially unproblematic until I was faced with the looming prospect of addressing an audience who knew far more than I did, in almost every way. Eventually, I put aside my original plans to impress them with my

imaginary encyclopaedic knowledge of social work and philosophy, in favour of speaking from the heart about my own experience, which as Frank (1997, p.135) describes, was the best I could ultimately offer:

> What if a group of professionals were to examine her and ask, what exactly do you have to teach?...she could certainly say this and that but her true witness, the witness that "really matters"…is not what she could say but what she is.

Despite the encouragement and support my simple presentation received on the day, I remained troubled by lingering feelings that I had been audacious in undertaking it, due to my limited experience and academic status. A passage often erroneously attributed to Mandela, meaningfully meandered through my head during the days and weeks which followed the Conference:

> Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure… We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? (Williamson, 1992, p. 176).

In 'Fields of Play' (1997) Richardson, describes her often heavily contested attempts to re-design ethnography via a long narrative poem and also as a drama. Reflecting upon this she ponders upon the 'violation of safe space' between conventional academic knowledge and other forms and advocates for 'passionate scholarship… where students feel 'safe' to err, transgress, because there is space for tensions and differences to be acknowledged, celebrated, rather than buried or eaten alive' (p.186).

I have settled, for the time being, on viewing my unlikely inclusion within a Keynote presentation to such an auspicious audience, as part of answering Richardson's call. Keynote speeches within academic conferences are normally given by prestigious speakers. Therefore inviting a part-time doctoral student, speaking only about her own experience could be seen as violating the 'safe space' largely populated by academics familiar with talking to each other. Twitter, and other forms of social media, similarly offer the potential for violating 'safe space' in a way which, as Richardson suggests, encourage students to transgress, because of the gains they may reap from this. For me, one of the main privileges of attending and speaking at JSWEC was the collapse of boundaries between myself and academics I could never otherwise have achieved:

Scene 3: 'Inspirational'

(The auditorium at Royal Holloway, following the Keynote presentation by Amanda T, Jon B and me. Jon and Amanda were like firecrackers - I have the uncomfortable feeling I may have been a damp squib……. Harry Ferguson, Professor of Social Work at Nottingham whose work I have admired for years approaches ……..)

Harry: *(extending his hand to shake mine, whilst looking me firmly in the eyes)*
Denise….. Inspirational……

Denise: *(turning in to 14-year-old schoolgirl - squealing)* Wow, thank you …do you know how much that means, coming from you?

Curtain

Harnessing the power of the genie

The growth of social media invites unlimited possibilities for enriching communication and building networks. However these new possibilities are accompanied by titanic challenges, ethical and otherwise (Bucher; Fieseler and Suphan (2013). My own tentative excursion into the world of online social networking brought me undreamed of gifts and privileges. I moved from an often dingy mental place where working from home produced feelings of isolation, exacerbated by a research area that provoked awkwardness and distress, to co-creating and becoming part of my own 'Team Turner.' Additionally, I forged networks and relationships with academics I would never otherwise have met or contacted and whose collegiality and support has enriched both my professional and personal life. I was also dubbed 'inspirational' by an academic whose work I had admired for years and given my own #Team Turner mug - a gift from Jon B which still sits proudly on my shelf at home.

I am not naive enough to negate the potentially harmful relationships which may spring from social media activity (Duncan-Daston; Hunter-Sloan; Fullmer, 2013). However, like Bolton (2011) I believe that people are naturally social creatures, even without the technology and whether it is Twitter, or any activity which supersedes it, now that this social networking genie is out of the bottle, I do not believe it will be possible to push it back inside.

The challenge is to learn how to harness the power of the genie in a way that enhances both the social work profession itself and the work we do with service users. For myself, I found that the excitement I gained from Twitter was becoming almost addictive, eventually introducing 'an oversupply of possibly relevant information' and an invasion of work matters into my private life (Bucher, Fieseler; Suphan, 2013). I have gradually learned to temper this by judicious use of the off button, although this is not, of course, always as easy as it seems:

Scene 4: Family Time (Reprise)

Saturday evening at home later that year – another opportunity for 'family time'. Amy, Dan and I are in the front room of our house watching a favourite television programme, or at least they are watching whilst I gaze at a mobile tablet device

Amy (irritably): Can you put those away please? We are either watching this programme and sharing family time or we may as well sit in separate rooms alone - or even go to bed!

Me (protesting): I'm just looking at 'Twitter' to see what everyone's saying about this - don't you want to know?

Amy (with a rising tide of further irritation): Twitter! No I do not want to know what's going on there! If I can't go on it then why are you allowed? … You're ruining family time … Please turn it off!

Me (sulking): It's different - I'm just doing it for work. It's very important for me to keep up with what's going on you know- if you looked you might think so too

Dan returns to the moral high ground, this time arguing that if I can go on Twitter then he should be allowed to go on his iPod, which he now slips out from under the cushion

Amy explodes with impotent rage and frustration ……..

Blackout

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Author's note: The names used within this chapter, have not been anonymised but consent has been sought and freely given in each case.